

## BATTLE FOR SUPREMACY IN ASIA PACIFIC

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### Abstract

*Asia Pacific region is one of the prominent region for the global powers due to its strategic importance as the major trading routes. Japan, India, Australia, China, and South Korea and ASEAN holds the prominent position in the region. The researchers in the article discussed about the competition between the Washington and its allies with the growing power/influence of Beijing in the region. Beijing's influence not only confined to the east of Asia but it stretched further in west under the BRI and CPEC projects as well as also with recent agreement with Tehran. The researchers have discussed the importance of China in the region as a major competitor and a balancer to the Washington power. The region is now one of the major centres of the battle for supremacy between the two major competitors Washington and Beijing. The researchers have discussed the policies carried by both the power centres in the region to gain the superiority in the region.*

**Keywords:** *Supremacy, Competition, Strategic partner, Nexus, Security*

### INTRODUCTION

The researchers discussed the competition between power centres like China, India, and other states and China- US struggle for the

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mastery of the region. Beijing's role as a leading power of the region due to its friendly ties with the states of the region including ASEAN despite its differences over the dispute in the South China Sea. The historical conflict with Japan including the territorial disputes over the Senkaku islands, and the India, which has unresolved territorial issues, has been the major challenges to its relations with these states despite its growing trade relations.

Washington remains another major player in the region, which has played an active role since the end of the World War-II due to its security commitments towards its allies Seoul, Tokyo, Manila, and other states to protect them from the regional and global threats. At the end of the World War –II, Washington's role increased due to its commitment towards its allies for reconstructing the devastated economies of the states, and defend its allies from growing threat of communism in the region. Its participation in the Korean War of 1950-53 under the banner of the United Nations (UN) was an effort to protect the pro-west South Korea against the communist North Korea. Since then its presence on the soils of the Seoul and Tokyo under the security partnerships has been an effort to provide security and protection to its allies in the region in order to prevent threat to its policies and promote its interests in the region.

Washington's security partnership with Islamabad under the 1954 and 1959 defence pacts has played a significant role in maintaining balance of power against the might of the Soviet influence and its support to non-communist states like India and Afghanistan. Islamabad's policy towards Washington has helped it defeat the Soviet forces in the Afghanistan in 1980s. Washington's relations with Islamabad nosedived in the 1990s because of their victory in Afghanistan, which changed the direction of the US foreign policy from South Asia to Middle East. During this period, Islamabad faced sanctions due to various security and political problems. In the new millennium, despite the differences between both the states Pakistan became the front line state in the war against terror and became the

non-NATO ally in 2004.

Washington's policy towards the region changed in the new millennium particularly towards the New Delhi, which became a strategic partner in the mid-2000s, and has remained a central player in its policy of the containing Chinese threat in the region. Washington perceived Beijing a threat to its interests in the region, which will establish a Sino-centric order in the region (Xinbo, 2000). Washington's strategic partnership with the New Delhi have altered the balance of power in the region which has forced the other major states like China to look towards other alternative options to maintain the balance of power in the region.

The battle for the supremacy has not new concept in the international politics as previously it was between the former Soviet Union (USSR) during the cold war years. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union at the end of the cold war, Washington became the sole super power. Since then has enjoyed the hegemonic role in the global issues and has shown its power in the Gulf war of 1990-91 and 2003 invasion of Iraq. Washington's engagement in Afghanistan's lost battle since 2001 resulted the emergence of anti-US forces in Afghanistan. Washington's military setbacks in Afghanistan have cost the thousands of lives and billions of US dollars to win the war in Afghanistan.

The US supremacy in the region has been challenged by the multiple factors:

- The rise of China as an economic power has presented an alternative to the states of the region viz-a viz US. Beijing emerged one of the largest economies and its rise as an economic powerhouse has led the projects like Belt & Road Initiative for the prosperity of region.
- The lost war in Afghanistan has tarnished the powerful image of the US as a superpower

- Chinese nexus with the states of the region under the BRI (Pakistan-China under CPEC, China-Iran strategic partnership)
- North Korea and Iran continued to challenge the US despite the sanctions and threats over the years. Pyongyang has conducted 13 missile tests last year to pressurize Washington to grant concessions and relief in sanctions. On the other hand, trump's withdrawal from nuclear deal with Iran in 2018 has further created tensions in the region (Lee, 2020)
- Pakistan the closest ally of the US has moved towards the China
- The formation of new alliances has challenged the US role in the region. In the new geo-political hotspots of south and East China Sea, Beijing seems to be putting into practice Sun Tzu's stratagem of subduing the enemy without fighting. (Tourangbam & Anand, 2020)
- Economic dependence over the China
- Reluctance of the Washington's allies due to its commitment towards the region particularly under the Trump administration has been questioned.
- The post Covid-19 world scenario would be different for both the power centers. As Washington accused Beijing of spreading the Covid-19 and President trump on many occasions called the Covid-19 China Virus. The response to deal with the Covid-19 has become the major cause of Trump's downfall and his defeat in 2020 US Presidential elections. On the other hand, Beijing's swift response has ensured its control over the situation. A recent report of UK based Centre for Economics and Business Research (CEBR) said China's skillful management of covid-19 would boost its relative growth compared to US and Europe and will take

Beijing to become world's largest economy by 2028 (BBC News, 2020).

Despite these challenges US has introduced the policies such as Asia Pivot strategy in 2011 in order to contain the rising China. The researchers in this context have discussed the US role in the region in order to understand that how it has affected the politics of the region.

## ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

### US involvement in the region

#### *Security partnership with the regional states*

Washington has remained one of the key strategic partners of the Tokyo, Seoul, Canberra and Manila since the end of the World War-II. With the end of the cold war era, Washington's priorities have changed as it has lost interest in the region except for the few major issues such as South China Sea territorial disputes, which also came under the Washington's radar in late 2000s. Washington has security partnerships with the states like South Korea since 1957, Japan, Philippines, Australia, Indonesia and Pakistan during the cold war years as they were the front-runners in their struggle against the communist threat in the region.

US has remained an active player in the regional politics, as it became one of the major challengers of the Soviet Union in its containment approach during the cold war years. Washington has to deal with the growing threats from the Soviet aggression and its expansion in the far-flung region across the globe. The end of World War-II has created new states in the third world and it was a challenging era as people in these regions remained under the European states colonial rule and Washington being a flag bearer of western ideology of freedom and liberalism has created suspicion among the newly formed states due to their colonial legacies. The 1950s era can be seen in these contexts as states like India. American policy makers ritualistically incant that India is the world's largest democracy and is therefore the natural

partner of the greatest democracy, the United States (Perkovich, 2010, p.11)

### *Economic role in the region*

Washington has played an active role in bringing the economic stability to its security partners through the financial aid under the different US economic programmes such as Marshall Plan after the end of the World War-II. Washington during these troublesome years between 1948-51 provided more than US\$ 13 billion under the Marshall Plan in order to boost the economies of the devastated Europe (McFarland, 2017). Washington in the region has continued to demonstrate the same spirit during these cold war years in order to protect its allies from falling to the communist power. Washington trade with its allies has not reached to the potential level as its bilateral trade with India is US\$ 109 in 2015 which reached to US \$ 149 billion in 2019 (US Department of State, 2020), whereas its trade with Japan is US \$ 217 billion in 2019, with South Korea US\$ 165 in 2018, Australia over US\$ 73 billion in 2018, Pakistan US\$ 6.5 billion in 2019, ASEAN US\$ 272 billion, China US \$ 659 billion in 2018. Washington has tried to increase its trade with these important states especially with China in order to gain some sort equilibrium in its bilateral trade ties and Trump administrations imposition of tariff over Chinese goods has been another step in this regard.

Washington has provided support to the movements against the enemy states (covert and overt) over the years to destabilize or overthrow the hostile regimes. Washington backed covert operations has not been new to the world as they have strived to change the anti-western/US regimes through the clandestine operations. Various declassified US government documents revealed the information regarding the operations including the former agents/diplomats /statesmen revealed them in their works during different times. CIA supported the 1959 uprising in the Tibet (covertly).

Washington's role in the recent Hong Kong crisis has been slammed by the Beijing as it has criticized the London, and Washington's

support to the protesters, which it called the involvement in the internal affairs of the state. Over the years, the role of CIA and other agencies led by the western world in clandestine operations against the regimes has been criticized but still Washington aimed to continue these operations in order to maintain its supremacy over the affairs by installing its pro governments/ regimes.

### **Chinese rise as a leading power**

#### ***Birth of the new power centre in the region***

Beijing since the turn of the century has emerged one of the leading economic powers of the region, which has been playing significant part in the development of their economies. While the US continues to wield the most superior military capabilities on earth, it is losing its dominant role in world affairs due to its economic position (Zhou, 2019). Beijing's BRI project has connected the majority of states of the region, and has provided an alternate power center to the region. As Sampson (2020) describes that deepening economic cooperation resulting from its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has concluded and extended a number of important regional trade agreements in the last two decades. Both these developments, along with the U.S. withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), have been widely interpreted as indicating China's growing regional influence. Thus, its cooperation with the regional states have increased over the years not only in economic matters but has extended to the defence sector as well. These trade agreements are driven by the geo-political interests of China in the region. Beijing has signed trade agreements with ASEAN, Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, Pakistan and Singapore.

#### ***Restoration of balance of power***

Washington emerged the lone super power with the fall of the Soviet Union, which resulted in the shift of balance of power in the region. As the Soviet allies like North Korea or the non-aligned states like

Indonesia left with no options, and this resulted in supremacy of the Washington.

With the rise of Beijing's economic power and its strategic partnerships with the states of the Asia Pacific region has restored the balance of power in the region as Beijing emerged as the alternate to Washington. Beijing has deepened its economic cooperation under BRI and over the years has extended its cooperation in regional agreements, which has led the increased influence of China in the region. Washington's lack of consistency in its policy to its commitments particularly the withdrawal of the trump from TPP has increased the role of Beijing as a major player of the region (Zhou, 2019).

Washington remained one of the key security partner of the multiple states of the region and Islamabad is one of them particularly since the beginning of the war on terror in 2001. Washington declared Islamabad as a major non-NATO ally in 2004. But with the increased interest of the Washington in New Delhi participation in its nexus against the Beijing threat in the region has raised concern in the decision makers in Islamabad.

Economic prosperity has become the hallmark of the Beijing's approach with its neighbours as Beijing continued to promote economic interests through the BRI project. Beijing has been cooperating with the states of the region under various forums such as the ASEAN plus One, ASEAN plus three, CPEC, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Asian Investment Infrastructure Bank (AIIB) and other forums.

### **Battle for supremacy**

BRI remained one of the major challenges to the Washington as it not only connects China with the other states but also will reduce the Washington's influence in those states. Since 2013 the president Xi has carried the Beijing's role as an economic driver in the region has further created influence in the region. BRI will serve China's

economic interests and strengthen its ties with the BRI partner countries to gain political dividends. It will likely promote the formation of a 'Eurasia Supercontinent,' in which the US has no place. Therefore, it is not surprising that the BRI has become the focus in the geo-competition between China and the US today (Zongyi, 2019).

Washington's policy of denuclearization of the two major threats to the world have been the major challenge to it. Trump became the first US president to have set foot on the North Korean soil, when he met with Kim Jong Un (North Korean leader) at Freedom House (Demilitarized Zone) on 30<sup>th</sup> June 2019. Both the leaders agreed to reduce tensions and North Korea will halt its nuclear programme. Challenges present in the region to the US has created a huge effect on the role of US as superpower. Korean and Iranian nuclear crisis remained one of the major challenges. Beijing's recent deal with the Tehran worth over US\$ 400 billion is viewed as a counter to the US approach of putting maximum pressure on Tehran over its nuclear programme.

In a post-cold war era, Washington's role has been questioned in the region due to its policies and priorities as its focus which has diverted towards the more important oil rich region of the Middle East. In response to the Washington's lack of commitment in the region, a new power center has been established in the new millennium due to Washington ill-conceived policies and its lack of interest towards the region particularly the 1997-98 and 2007-08 financial crises in the East Asia and South East Asia have greatly affected the economies of the region and during these difficult times Beijing rather than Washington rescued the ailing economies of the ASEAN and other Asian states.

Washington's commitment towards the region has been questioned even after its announcement of Asia rebalance approach and the fear of its allies of Washington dubious/ lack of commitment policies can be viewed in the Trump's decision of withdrawal of US from TPP in

2017. Washington have lost a great opportunity to increase its influence in the region but its withdrawal from treaty has further diminished its chances to counter China. With the US withdrawal Beijing becomes the major power center of the region and is a member of the RECP which constituted the ASEAN, China, India, New Zealand, Japan and south Korea. The RECP region covers 40 percent of the global trade with a population of 3 billion, which makes 43 percent of the total population and has a combined GDP of US\$20 trillion (Pham, 2017).

Formation of new alliances as Washington has strengthened its traditional security partnerships with the Tokyo, Seoul and Seoul, but has also included New Delhi as a key state in its strategy to contain the Beijing threat, which has been highlighted in the 2019 National Security Strategy of US. Whereas due to its tilt towards New Delhi, Washington has lost its traditional security partner Islamabad who has found a love with Beijing under the China-Pakistan Economic Cooperation (CPEC).

Pakistan significance due to its strategic location brings it at the center of the international attention because of the Washington's geopolitical interests such as War in Afghanistan, Iran's nuclear programme, Chinese development projects under the BRI and the New Delhi's dispute with Beijing over territorial disputes.

Islamabad's influence over the Taliban plays a significant part over US foreign policy in the region as it eliminates the chances of New Delhi's influence in future afghan government. New Delhi's fear of emerging threat from Islamabad-Beijing nexus over territorial issues and threat from non-state actors provides Islamabad a major role in the region (Jacob, 2020).

Islamabad has been able to maintain the delicate balance in its relations with Tehran and Riyadh despite their ideological and political differences. Islamabad shares friendly ties with the Riyadh and has remained her security partner. Islamabad's security

partnership with the Riyadh has been extended to its roots of Sunni Islam where Riyadh is considered to be the protector of the Holy site of Muslims i.e., Mecca and Medina, and Islamabad over the years have ensured the security of the regime in Riyadh as it did during the Gulf War-I when it deployed its forces in two holy cities, and in 1979 has assisted in ending the seizure of Grand Mosque. Islamabad considered Riyadh the strategic partner. Saudi Arabia along with US provided military and financial aid to Pakistan during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan (Paracha, 2019). Despite of the international pressure in 1998 Riyadh was the only state, which provided economic and political support in times crisis including after the 1998 nuclear tests of Pakistan.

Islamabad also shares friendly ties with Ankara and Tehran and other Middle Eastern states. Islamabad has raised the voice for the Muslim's of Palestine, Bosnia Herzegovina, Kashmir and other parts of the world. Islamabad's hostile relations with New Delhi over the Kashmir issue has remained a source of concern for policy makers in Washington.

Islamabad's role in the peaceful resolution of Afghan crisis due to its influence in the region and its role in bringing the Taliban to talks in December 2018 (Latif, 2020) with the Washington, which resulted in the February 2020 historic deal for the withdrawal of the US forces from Afghanistan.

Washington's commitment towards its allies is a greater challenge to maintain its hegemony in the region. Washington under the umbrella of the Quad has been promoting its policy of US rebalance Asia policy, as the US National Security Strategy Paper of 2017 clearly indicated the China a threat to the US interests. Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy is also designed to promote that idea by forging an alliance with the New Delhi to counter the threat of Beijing. The Quad has become active due to the aggressive pursuit of the Beijing's policy

in the region to promote and achieve its interests in the region (Reynolds & Herskovitz, 2020).

US allies in the region are also promoting their influence to reduce the Chinese influence and in this regard Seoul's New Southern policy 2017, which aimed towards deepening ties with the Southeast Asia, as part of Seoul's policy to engage with other states of region in order to reduce reliance over few states particularly related to trade and defence. Despite pursuing its independent foreign policy, Seoul is still connected with US over the resolution of Korean nuclear issue and in order to bring North Korea to its terms it has embraced the sanctions over Pyongyang (Yeo, 2020).

New Delhi has remained one of the key states in the Washington's approach to deal with China threat. Washington closeness towards New Delhi has been not new as during the cold war years when the Indo-Chinese war of 1962 took place Washington provided economic and military aid to the New Delhi. During the war Indian Prime Minister Jawhar Lal Nehru has sought, US support and wrote to President Kennedy to provide jet fighters to stem the Chinese aggression (The Hindu, 2015). With the rise of china as competitor to the Washington's interests in the region the focus of the US remained to forge closer ties and alliances with the states of the region in order to contain the Chinese threat. India has been identified as a close partner over the years in Washington's policy makers. However, due to its non-aligned policy and its closeness towards the Soviet Union during the cold war years it was not possible to materialize the Indo-US alliance. However, with end of cold war and the dissolution of Soviet Union and the rise of the mutual threat (i.e., China) both the states came closer and formed the strategic partnership in the mid-2000s. Both New Delhi and Washington perceived Beijing as a potential threat to their interests in the region, which became a central factor in the bonding between two states.

As New Delhi considers Beijing strategy of String of Pearls (i.e., encircling New Delhi through building ports in Hambantota (Sri

Lanka), Chittagong (Bangladesh), and Gwadar (Pakistan)) an encirclement policy in order to contain the Indian naval forces in the Indian Ocean and threaten its security in future conflicts through the use of naval forces from these ports. Not only that but its growing nexus with its arch enemy Pakistan is a source of concern for New Delhi particularly the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which New Delhi believes will involve the Chinese forces presence in the disputed regions of Gilgit-Baltistan and Pakistani territories. Washington on the other hand views New Delhi as a counter measure against the Beijing in the region due to its ties with the neighboring states excluding Pakistan. New Delhi over the years have become a dominant power in the South Asia and played significant role in regional conflicts. Washington's approach to deal with the China threat has formulated in its Asia Pivot Strategy of 2011 in which it has included New Delhi as a key state. Despite New Delhi's growing ties and US assurances in its treaties over the years New Delhi seems reluctant to antagonize China until recently when the border clashes with China led New Delhi to proactively pursue the Beijing threat with the support of the US (Crabtree, 2020).

Washington has indicated that because of lack of attention given to the states of the Asia Pacific region they looked to the other alternative forces, which resulted in the increased influence of Beijing in the region. ASEAN became the leading trading partner of China, not only that but the other security partners like Tokyo and Seoul too were also involved in increasing trade with the Beijing. New Delhi also has over US\$ 90 billion trade with China, which became a source of concern for Washington as states of region are not ready to sacrifice their interests without the solid assurances about the US commitment in the region. In order to ensure its allies in December 2018 Trump passed Asia Reassurance initiative act (ARIA) which authorized US \$ 5.1 billion in spending for the US allies in East Asia and South East Asia (Saha, 2020).

The Philippines remains one the major security partners of Washington since the end of the World War –II, and has signed the Visiting Forces Agreement under its president Rodrigo Duterte has been looking to establish friendly ties with the Beijing. Beijing supported Manila with the US\$ 24 billion in 2016 under aid and investment programme. Beijing collaboration with Manila is an effort to ensure the reduction of Washington's influence in the disputed waters of the South China Sea. Whereas Washington has not only favored the Freedom of navigation policy in the South China Sea but has supported the other claimant parties in the South China Sea against the Beijing's influence (Jennings, 2020).

Beijing's influence has increased tremendously due to its economic and security ties with various states of the region including Pakistan, Iran, North Korea, Indonesia, and other ASEAN states. Its influence with the traditional security partners like manila, Jakarta, Islamabad has increased over the years due to its trade linkages and increased economic and defense cooperation. Beijing's policy of non-intervention in the internal affairs of the state has been appreciated by the states despite being a communist state. US major challenge remains in Afghanistan where it is losing ground to the ferocious forces of Taliban despite its presence on the Afghan soil for nearly twenty years.

Covid-19 has emerged a threat to the economic growth of the world including the US and its allies, as they remained the worst sufferers in the Covid-19. The US and Indian trade war with China cannot become successful due to the dependency over the Chinese industries and its success model to deal with the pandemic like Covid-19. India and the US are the worst sufferers of the pandemic and its traditional allies of Europe are also facing the challenge of the virus. Thus, it remains a question that how fast Washington along with its allies will be able to recover their economies and challenge the growing China.

## CONCLUSION

With the Beijing's rise as an economic power in the region holds a threat to the Washington's interests in the region due to its lack of commitment towards the region since the end of the cold war era. President Obama's policy of Asia Pivot strategy in 2011 and 2012 US Strategic Guidance Programme shows the US intention to ensure the Washington's commitment to its allies/other states. However, the idea did not materialized due to the change of administration in Washington and new president Trumps withdrawal from the Trans Pacific Partnership agreement and his stress to its allies that they should pay for their security further increased the rift among its allies. In the meantime, Beijing continued its progress by initiating the Belt & Road Initiative in 2013 and connected more than 60 states through signing the agreements including CPEC with Islamabad. Beijing rise presented not only an option for the states to prosper from Chinese economic growth but also create balance of power in the region. Beijing has continued to cooperate with its neighbours under its peaceful co-existence policy with its neighbours in order to resolve the disputed issues in the mineral rich South China Sea. Beijing's role in Kabul and Tehran is viewed as an aggressor by Washington as it considered that its role in reaching a deal with Tehran recently will help Tehran from coming out of isolation thus ending the Maximum Pressure strategy of trump administration over Iran's nuclear programme. US National security strategy 2017 and National Defense strategy 2018 viewed Beijing and Moscow as competitors and potential threats to its interests (Paal, 2019).

Washington in the region has strengthened its ties with its allies by boosting the military presence in the region as it has counted China a major threat to its interests. The 2012 Strategic Guidance programme of the US focuses on the transfer of 60 per cent of US forces to the region by 2020 is a clear indication of their goal. Washington's policy has been slow due to the change of administration in 2016, which resulted some sort of misunderstanding to its allies about its

commitment in the region particularly Trump withdrawal decision from TPP in 2017. But with the security alliances in the region's important states like South Korea and Japan can play crucial role in future due to presence of US forces there since 1950s and the deployment of THAAD in South Korea. Washington reactivation of Quad alliance has been another effort to curtail the Beijing's influence in the region through the web of alliances. Since 2017, the Quad powers US, India, Japan, and Australia are vying to counter the growing influence of China. New Delhi remains the centre of Washington rebalance Asia policy, and its dispute with Beijing over the border issues recently has dragged the region into hostile environment. The region is a battleground for the two power centres in order to gain the superiority over the other power.

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